Dek Unu Magazine
April 2025
Trees
Tom Kirkendall

Cover **Los Osos Oaks** ©Tom Kirkendall

Eleven

This is *Dek Unu Magazine*. In Esperanto, dek unu means "eleven." Eleven images from a single artist. Eleven artists in eleven solo issues in each publication year. Dek Unu publishes the work of a new artist-photographer in each issue. The artist's work and words are featured in individual focus as the sole purpose for each issue of the magazine. Unlike other arts and letters magazines which might look for work from a variety of artists to support an editorial staff's theme, at Dek Unu, theme and imagery are always each artist's own.

This Month

It was the dean of landscape photographers, Ansel Adams himself, who said, "Landscape photography is the supreme test of the photographer—and often the supreme disappointment." There is certainly no one among us who, back at home after a serious outdoor photo jaunt, has not looked at the result, only to learn again exactly what Adams was talking about. Whether it's a hundred digital exposures or a roll of 12 two-and-a-quarters, the losers often easily outnumber the winners. There are always two consolations though. Any walk through and deep conversation with nature is its own reward, and even Adams, the man who "wrote the book," had plenty of similar, disappointing days.

Artist and analog photographer Tom Kirkendall's title for this series is "Trees" but these are not at all a botanist's specimens. In his craft and vision, Kirkendall makes each of these artworks as a proposed solution to the riddle of the landscape—how to pull location, weather, equipment, composition, and darkroom alchemy together to share an equivalent image of the photographer's feeling—the original moment of "Wow!"—with the rest of us. His long career has often focused on outdoor and adventure photography, and this series comes from his travels in the back-country of California, the Carolinas, Arizona, and his home in Washington state. His trip takes us to one surprise after another: a leaf, a rootball, an odd natural arch of moss covered limbs. Each is a gourmet's example of traditional black-and-white photography. Each artworks is a singularity in our image-saturated visual universe, a one-of-a-kind record of a single test of patience, skill, and luck. For April, Kirkendall presents eleven of them, each one a winner.

The Pacific Northwest is not well known for its fall color, you have to seek it out. I did not have to go far for this image. We were raking leaves from a big leaf maple tree in the front yard when I looked down and this one Big Leaf looked up at me saying, "Photograph me." I traded my rake for my 4x5 camera exposing two sheets of Ilford FP4 film. I thanked the leaf for being there, raked it up along with a bunch of others, and put it in the compost pile.

Big Leaf Maple

It had been raining buckets of rain for days before I arrived at Congaree National Park. Most of the trails were under water and the air was thick as pudding with humidity. The winds were still and the famous mosquito swarms had taken the day off. Because of the dense forest, long distance views were few. When I came to the banks of Weston Lake I knew I had something special. The trees on the far side were still and the lake showed minimal movement, allowing for an interesting reflection. Perfect conditions for my 4x5 camera with Ilford Delta 100 film with a green filter.

Weston Lake

On a photo trip along the California Coast, I spotted a little dot on the map, the Los Osos State Nature Reserve. Always curious, I had to explore. Turns out to be a wild collection of Coast Live Oak trees growing on ancient sand dunes. Some of the trees have had 800 years to grow long, twisted branches reaching out as if to connect to nearby trees. The day was perfect with low clouds, no fog, and no wind. There were multitude of interesting things to photograph, however the long twisted branches spoke to me and my 4x5 camera with Ilford HP5 film and yellow filter.

Los Osos Oaks

A few days after I photographed Weston Lake, the flood waters had dropped enough to walk the trails without getting soggy shoes. Congaree National Park is not a true swamp. It is a floodplain holding the largest area of virgin southern bottom land hardwoods remaining in the United States. It will flood about ten times a year, setting up ideal conditions for reflections and views of trees standing in water. Wonderful conditions for large format cameras. 4x5 camera with Ilford Delta 100.

Congaree Swamp

Located in the foothills of the Cascade Mountains, a short drive from Seattle, the "Alps" are a go-to place for a day hike and an escape from the urban environment. I walk the numerous trails mostly in winter when the skiing is not great and between rain storms. Every time I pass under this archway, I feel compelled to capture a photograph of these moss draped trees. The forces of nature somehow encouraged these deciduous trees to bend over, creating a mossy covered gateway to forest dominated by taller and stronger fir and hemlock trees.
Yashica-Mat TLR camera with Ilford HP5 film.

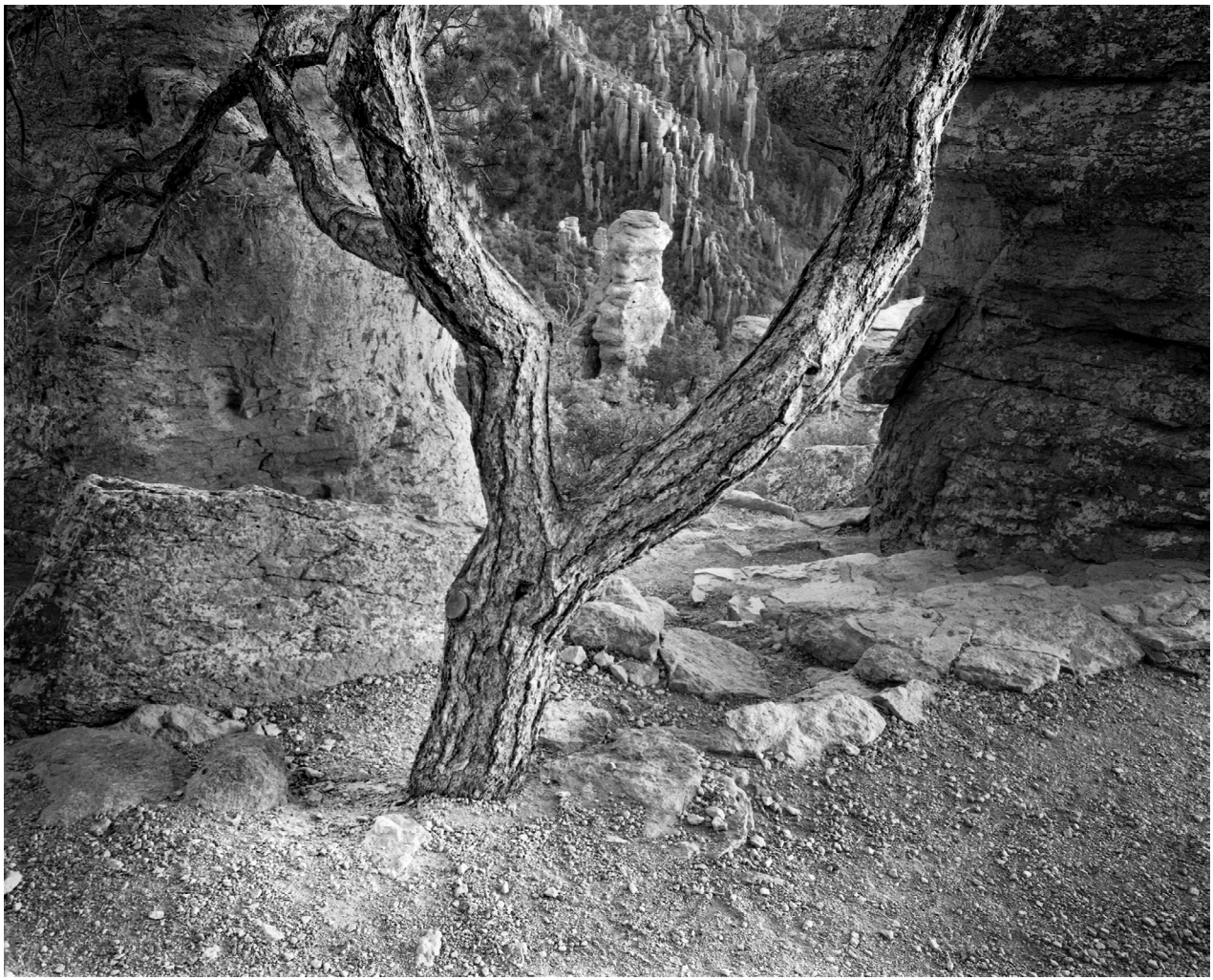
Issaquah Alps

Scouting locations for a photographic workshop, with my good friend Greg Vaughn, we found a cliff with wide, endless views. Walking along the cliff's edge, this juniper tree presented itself to me as a must-photograph opportunity. As I set up my camera, I was amazed how this tree was growing out of what appeared to be bare rock with little or no dirt. The complete opposite from the trees in the Congaree. The diversity of trees always amazes me. Growing for what must be many, many years, this tree has a wonderful view to enjoy over its lifetime. Makina W67 camera with Ilford HP5 film yellow filter.

Utah Cliff

On another scouting adventure with Greg Vaughn and Wayne Suggs, we were exploring the Chiricahua National Monument. The Chiricahua is mostly noted for its extensive hoodoos and balanced rocks. Although the towering rocks are a marvel to look at, I found this tree along the edge of the trail forming a sling-shot view of the rock pillars in the distance. The light was ideal as the sun dipped past the horizon making a serene ending to an otherwise fast-paced day of scouting. Makina W67 camera with Ilford HP5 film yellow filter.

Chiricahua



Olympic National Park is noted for many things: ocean, rain forest, mountains, and glaciers. All are spectacular, but it is the trees that stand out for me. They have massive girths, towering heights, and are hundreds of years old. Walking through the Sol Duc Rain Forest for alpine destinations above the trees, I have to stop and take a few moments to stand in silence to admire their beauty. How many wind storms, snow storms, scorching summer days, and forest fires have they witnessed? If trees could talk, the stories they could tell us! Hasselblad with Ilford SFX film and red filter.

Sol Duc River Valley

Two old-growth cedar trees growing in the floodplain of the Hoh River in Olympic National Park. Bonded together at the base, with a branch from one reaching out to the other. Are they good friends, a married couple, or twins split from a single cone dropped a few centuries ago? Hasselblad with Ilford FP4 Plus film and green filter.

Hoh River Valley

From the rootball of a rain forest giant tree there sprouts an abundance of new life. When trees give in to the forces of time and gravity their usefulness is far from over. Known as "nurse logs," a variety of vegetation can take root on the fallen giants. Over time: trees, ferns, moss, molds, lichens, and forest critters will make this place a home. The never-ending cycle of forest life. Hasselblad with Ilford FP4 Plus film and green filter.

Rain Forest Rootball

Trees, the ultimate renewable resource. I live in a house made of wood. I heat my house with a wood-burning stove. I write on paper. The book I read is made of paper. In so many ways trees intersect our lives every day. Trees, the ultimate renewable resource. So long as we do not cut down too many too fast. Rolleicord TLR camera with Ilford HP5 Plus film.

Clearcut

Artist Interview - Tom Kirkendall

Although categories are always blurry, much of your work falls into the nature, outdoor, adventure realm. What attracts you?

When people find out that I am a photographer they ask, “What do you photograph?” My usual response is “I am a travel landscape photographer where most of my best work starts three miles from the nearest road.” It is the solitude of the back-country environment that I am drawn to. I do some street photography, city-spaces, sports, and industrial work that I totally enjoy doing, but it is the "Way-Out-There" work that I most enjoy.

Tom Kirkendall

Why is landscape photography so difficult? What do most people get wrong? Yours are so good, what's your secret?

Photographing a landscape is easy. Anybody with a cell phone can do it. Go on Instagram and you can see billions of landscape pictures that you will wiz by with little more than a raised eyebrow. To create a portrait of the land that makes you stop and go “WOW!” is a a whole new level of image creation. Mostly it comes down to understanding composition.

Understanding what belongs and makes the image flow through the frame is a difficult thing to master. Look at any well published landscape image, it will have a clean uncluttered flow, no matter how busy the image is.

Most important to me however, no matter how goofy it sounds, you must become one with the environment and let it speak to you. Where are you? Is it quiet, noisy, calm, frantic? What is the air like? Hot, humid, dry, cold. wet? What is the ground like? Muddy, dry, wet, rocky? Breath the air, feel the ground, feel what is around you. Make THAT your photograph. The landscape is there, but how does the environment relate to what you see. Photograph the place, not just the land.

As difficult as the genre is already, you prefer film and large format cameras, heavy equipment, slow process. Why?

I grew up with film. Film is not difficult. Sitting in front of a computer, now that is difficult! With film you have to be a little more careful, a little more aware, a little more selective because there is no “I can fix that in post.” Yes, you can do some real darkroom magic and wrestle out some fantastic images from questionable decisions made at exposure time. For me there is something more unique to a good darkroom print. As any good wet process printer will tell you, "No two prints are the same." Minor changes from print to print will make each a treasure, unlike any other. If you see a wonderful digital print and would like another, with a few clicks of the mouse and you can have a print ”exactly” like the one you saw. Nice, but is it unique?

Are large format cameras slow? Well yes. They take a little more time to get the image. But that slowness gives you a bit more time to experience where you are, to feel the environment and make it part of the image. I often tell people that the tripod is not just a steady tool, it is a thinking tool. It gives you time to think.

You're into odd cameras (plastic, pinhole, etc.) and techniques. When do you break out the Holga? When do you opt for alt-process?

I purchased my first HOLGA as a gift for my son when he was in grade school for something he could toy around with. He never was really interested. And that was OK with me. I never wanted him to become a photographer. I looked at the images he did take and was wowed at the crude but elegant quality of the images. I gave him $5.00 for the camera and started to use it. It was his and I could not just take it! After a while, I took

Wrightsville Beach, Holga 120

it everywhere and always tried to make an image whenever I stopped to photograph. I really like the simplicity of it. The Holga breaks down photography to personal vision. One lens, basic shutter, mostly in focus. I now own several different kinds of Holga cameras. I am more known for my Holga work than other forms of photography.

I was given a very old 8x10 camera with one barrel lens which doesn't have a shutter. Not having an 8x10 enlarger I wanted to do something with it besides a standard contact print—Van Dyke is perfect for big negatives. My good friend Chip Hedgcock introduced me to lumen printing. I'll go out in the yard and find something interesting. Great fun. Always exploring.

Back to the beginning, talk about your early years. Looks like you moved from coast to coast?

I am the youngest of three boys in a typical middle class family. We lived in Saratoga, California, in a typical middle class neighborhood. It was a fun place to spend my childhood. Bike riding, skateboarding, swim lessons, exploring dry creek beds, flying kites, what could be better? School was never my happy place. I struggled to keep up. In today's world I am sure they would have tried to medicate me to make me "normal." I was normal... just not their normal. In 1969, when I was 12, we moved to Wilmington, North Carolina. Probably the best thing that ever happened to me. Race relations were on a razor's edge at the time and it was really the first time I had ever interacted with anybody not white and middle class. Interacting with a wide variety of people taught me to get along with the person next to you and make friends with anybody. To hate someone just because they do not look, talk, act, speak, or dress like you is about as stupid as it gets.

Do you remember high points or surprises from those years?

I started surfing at age 15. It saved me. School was hard, making friends was slow. Surfing gave me a place to go and be ME. Surfing is a solitary sport. You, your surfboard, and a wave—nothing else mattered. It gave me the space I need to be me.

How did the photography thing begin? Did you start young?

I have always tinkered with photography. It was something that I could do and feel successful at. I pointed the camera and I got an image. SUCCESS!! No matter how bad it was, I got something. I took it more seriously in my high school years with a Canon FTB and a few lenses. I even had a few of my surfing photos published in *Eastern Surf Magazine*, Eastern Surfing Association's monthly, including one on the cover.

When a family friend gave me a Leica enlarger and trays, I taught myself to print black and white. At 19 years old, I was wondering what I was going to do with my life. Higher education was not a possibility, working construction was great fun and looked like a good direction. Then a friend got me a job photographing Little League Baseball and I was hooked. From that point on I was laser focused on becoming a photographer.

Your work shows the signs of a serious, "classical" photo education. Where did you get your training?

Trying to “become” a photographer I did all the usual things. I photographed portraits, weddings, and I got a job in the local camera store. I did what I could to capture photos wherever I was. I soon realized my work was really second rate at best. I needed help. Workshops were not really available back then, the only real option was a photo school. After searching around I discovered Brooks Institute of Photography in Santa Barbara, California. I went to Brooks mostly because it was on the coast and the surfing was good. It was a great place to learn photography as a craft and a profession. It was a wonderful starting point.

During my first year at Brooks our class took a trip to Carmel to photograph. We were lucky enough to visit with Morley Baer at his house. When he brought out some of his prints I was completely stunned! I had never really seen what a GOOD print could look like. That has been my gold standard ever since that day. Over the years, I have taken darkroom workshops from John Sexton, Bruce Barnham, and Alan Ross to try and achieve a Good Print. Still working at it.

Does training in other media work into your photography?

I like to draw with pencil. I will take one of my photographs and try and make a pencil drawing of it. In doing so, I can concentrate on how the image is composed and how the light

works with the landscape. It gives me time to really look at what I have done and see how I can make it better. I find it helps me to simplify and unclutter my photography.

Mentors? *Senseis*? Influences that need a shout out?

For what I learned about good composition, I give all the credit to my friends Terry Donnelly and Mary Liz Austin. I learned more about how to compose and how to construct a photograph from them than any photo school or workshop. If my work is well-composed all the credit lands in their laps.

The Pacific Northwest coast is a destination for artists of all sorts. What kind of place is it for you as a resident? As an artist?

Every place on earth has its own heart beat. I consider the Pacific Northwest a quiet, softer place among those I have visited. Quiet because the forests tend to be thick with undergrowth and rotund trees that reach for the sky with heavy branches that block sun, wind, and sound. The coast is mostly undeveloped and not known for crashing surf, making a day on the coast a clutter free zone. The mountains are shaped by volcanoes and smoothed by glaciers, giving them a

softer edge than some jagged uplifted range. The frequent cloud cover softens the light, taking the edge off hard sunlight, unlike the hard, direct light of the Southwest. In all, it is a place to take a slightly more thoughtful pace to explore and photograph.

Most photographers who haven't would like to do a book. You've done several. What's the process like?

My wife, Vicky Spring, is a photographer as well. We started our career by producing recreational guide books with The Mountaineers Publishing. We did cross-country skiing, hiking, and bicycling guides in the western states. It was a great life. We would spend months skiing or hiking or cycling, gathering information. Then we would spend the next few months putting it all together. When one book was completed, we would start on another. Vicky was the main force behind the guide books. Our first book was her idea and she did the final writing for publication in all the books. We split the work on photography and I would draw the maps. Possibly my favorite was *100 Hikes In California's Central Sierra and Coast Range*. We hiked 110 trails in 90 days while packing our one-year-old son along all the way. We have also done a few photo books over the years. The last one was *Washington: A Photographic Journey,* published by Farcountry Press. A book of my black and white work would be fun to do, but I think the market would be very small.

Talk about the business side of your work. How did you get things started? How do you keep things going?

The business of photography is nothing like it was when we first started. Way back in history, I would go to the magazine rack at the library or some book store and find a publication that I thought we could contribute to then look up the photo editor and call them to introduce our work. I would follow up with

postcards I printed in our darkroom. Around Christmas, I went to the calendar racks and followed the same process. We did some advertising in American Showcase Books with some success and I hired a promotion company to try to get us some advertising work. What worked best for me was the phone and cold calling. Now, most everyone we worked with just goes to a stock agency to get the images they need. Can't blame them, one stop shopping is much easier. We still work with a few calendar companies and two stock agencies. Now it is all Internet and social media...

Teaching, workshops, and expeditions are a significant part of your practice. How did that start?

Terry Donnelly got me started in the workshop world. I worked with him and Mary Liz Austin in Yellowstone National Park during the winter for over 10 years. After that, another fantastic friend, Greg Vaughn, got me hooked up with another group doing workshops across the country. I worked with them for the next three years. I was never the organizer or lead photographer. I was just a hired hand and I liked it that way. It was a joy to help people find their own vision, to create a photograph that spoke to who they are as a person and not the typical image that is expected.

After a certain point photography instruction doesn't work as "chalk and talk." What's your approach?

Before someone would look through the viewfinder I would tell them to ask three questions. 1) What am I photographing? Sounds too simple, but you need to identify your subject. It is not always the biggest or most obvious iconic thing in front of you. 2) Why am I photographing it? Is it the weather, the texture, the colors, the contrast, or is it the position of something? What was it that attracted you to the scene? 3) How can I make it better? Should I move, change my point of view, add something, remove something, change my lens, change the height of my tripod? Make it the best you can, make it yours.

It's about vision and creativity as much as technique. How does your creativity work?

Creativity comes from curiosity. I am curious about everything. What is out there, what is on the other side, how does something work, what formed the land, why is that tree there. The questions are endless, the answers unlimited. I do not really plan much in advance. I may choose a location and a camera for the day, but I will go with zero expectations. I think you can over plan and miss out on opportunity that happens along the way. I prefer to go to a new place with little information then drift through the location with an open mind to possibilities.

Do you hang out with other photographers? Are you part of a group? Formal? Informal? Where does input come from?

I am not a member of any photo groups. I have a group of friends and we talk occasionally but it is rarely about photography. The best input I have about my photography is what is rejected and what is kept by my stock agency. If they reject one or more images I have submitted, I try to determine

why. This makes me more aware of what I am photographing and how to make it better. I would much rather know why someone does not like my work rather than always hearing "Wow, that's great." It is hard to fix good, easier to work on bad. I have shown my work to a few gallery owners and photos editors over the years to get their spin on it. Mostly it is positive. If anything I get the drift that my work is a little too scattered. Color, black and white, toy camera, large format and whatever is next. I get it. But it is the variety of styles and formats that keep me thinking and creative.

Getting "likes" on social media is also an interesting way to gauge what works. But I put little weight on that scale. I have had my prints in numerous group gallery shows across the country, often published in *Black & White Magazine*, *Shots Magazine,* and I was spotlighted by Harman Technology (Ilford Film) with *Infocus #38*. All encouraging me to keep it up.

What kind of critic are you? What do you look for in new work you see? Are you easy to please? A tough sell?

When I see new work, I want to see the photographer in the image. Not the physical person, rather I want to see their personality, vision, and spin on the world. Cookie cutter images are boring. Make the image YOU. Be inspired by others but the camera is in your hands. Make it your image. Some people think they are creative when they convert to black-and-white or pick up a toy camera. That is a technique, but was it necessary for the image? Did it make it better, make it YOU, or just make it different. Yes, I guess I am a hard sell.

Gear. Tools of the trade? Anything that's indispensable?

Ten film cameras including the big, old, wooden 8x10, a Makina W67, and three Holgas and a Diana. Canon, Olympus, and Fujifilm digitals. Pentax and Sekonic meters. A Saunders 4x5 enlarger and

usually Ilford film and paper. For digital, just enough Photoshop to process an image. But, get right down to it, camera, light meter, film, developer, and printing paper is a personal choice. Chose something, stick with it, work with it, learn it, understand it and your work will be as good as you can make it.

What's next? Another back-country adventure soon?

My favorite place is the next place I'm going to visit. Where ever that is. I was lucky to marry a woman who likes to explore as much or more than I do. Vicky and I along with our two children have been on some great adventures. We have weathered out some storms, chased away a few bears, had gear break downs but nothing we consider extraordinary. We go, do with what we have, and work out problems as they come. That may sound oversimplified to many, but things can be difficult and zany or simple and solvable. It all depends on your point of view.

We are always on the lookout for new adventures. Now that our offspring are grown and on their own, we have time to take longer adventures. This summer we plan on bicycling half of The Great Northern Bike Packing Route across Canada. We will bicycle from Victoria, British Columbia, to Duluth, Minnesota — 3,500 miles or so.

I do not think anything is ever finished. I can make a good print today only to make a better one years later. No location is ever done. Go back, again, again, and again. Something new every time. Although I am a little burned out with Yellowstone I am sure I will return someday. Otherwise, no real projects on the horizon beside cycling across Canada. Right now I am just happy drifting from adventure to adventure, photo to photo. Life is good. Now GET OUTSIDE!

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